

Erie Canal Centennial  
Commission

1924-1925



STATE OF NEW YORK

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ERIE CANAL CENTENNIAL COMMISSION

CHAPTER 233, LAWS OF 1924

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SECRETARY, ALFRED M. O'NEILL, 25 NORTH PEARL STREET, ALBANY, N. Y.



STATE OF NEW YORK  
ERIE CANAL CENTENNIAL COMMISSION  
ALBANY

*November 29, 1924.*

DEAR SIR:

The Commission created by the last Legislature to arrange for a proper celebration in 1925 of the centennial of the opening of the original Erie canal invites the co-operation and aid of all citizens.

CANAL OPENING, AN HISTORIC EVENT:

The Erie canal is one of our oldest State institutions. Its opening in October, 1825 marked the beginning of a distinct era in the development of this State as well as of the whole Middle Atlantic and New England regions. It was an historic event of such far-reaching importance, forming as it did the foundation on which the prosperity and growth of our State has been built, that it is most fitting its centennial should be commemorated with proper ceremonies.

BUILDING OF THE CANAL, A GIGANTIC TASK:

The record made by the old Erie canal is well known. It is not the purpose of the Commission at this time to make more than a passing reference to its accomplishments. We desire now merely to recall to the minds of the people the achievements of the men of a hundred years ago in establishing a water route from the west.

Aid from the National Government was denied, but the young State of New York courageously entered upon the project of providing a highway for commerce from the Great Lakes to the Sea — a task which in those days was considered a tremendous one even for the undertaking of a great nation. As compared with the present day, engineering science was in its infancy and the tools were primitive; but a way was blazed through the forest and the swamp; across rivers and valleys and through the hills. Our far seeing forefathers, broad of vision and stout of heart, enthusiastically entered upon the project and carried it through to a successful completion in the face of every obstacle, physical and financial.

THE EARLY STATESMEN:

A roster of those identified with the building of the first canal includes the names of men who were most prominent in their generation. Begun in 1817, the first Erie canal was finished and opened to navigation in 1825.

It brought the State of New York to the attention of the civilized world. It was declared in the Courts of Europe at that time to have been the greatest accomplishment of the new American Nation. The historian aptly said:

"New York has built the longest canal in the world in the least time, with the least experience, for the least money and to the greatest public benefit."

BENEFITS TO STATE AND NATION:

The benefits foreseen did come and in far greater measure than the fondest expectations. These benefits may be briefly summarized as follows:

It demonstrated the ability of a self-governed people to execute a great public work; and one that was fully paid for within ten years after its completion.

It provided the only practicable means of communication between the west and northwest and the Seaboard.

It arrested the tide of commerce then flowing south through the Ohio and Mississippi rivers to the Gulf of Mexico and turned it in an easterly direction to the northern Atlantic seaboard.

It advanced commerce on the Great Lakes by providing a direct outlet to the sea.

It gave a decided impetus to emigration to the west and stimulated the settlement of the States of the middle west.

It speedily populated this State, its opening having been followed immediately by a tremendous growth of cities and villages along its route.

It opened up farming regions to the north and south of its line.

In eliminating the hardship of stage-coach travel, it reduced the cost of transportation and travel by more than eighty per cent.



It reduced the time of travel between New York and Buffalo from six weeks to ten days.

Its building and some of the early enlargements cost the people nothing but on the contrary enriched the State treasury. The amount collected as tolls up to 1881 when they were abolished exceeded the total sum expended upon it previous to that year by more than \$42,000,000.

It carried through this State a steady flow of commerce, enriching all communities along the way.

It focused attention here and attracted capital and genius to the State.

It made New York City the greatest seaport of the New World and the metropolis of the Nation.

It made this Commonwealth the Empire State of the Union.

#### LEST WE FORGET:

The original Erie canal in fact foreshadowed the great increase in population and wealth of this and the middle western States. It was the pioneer waterway, built not only to secure for New York its legitimate share of the Nation's commerce but was for the advantage of the entire country.

The great benefit to the State and Nation which came from the construction of the Erie canal has been recognized by the people. They have emphatically shown their faith in it and their desire that its capacity keep pace with the constantly increasing requirements of commerce, by voting large sums of money for the improvement of the old canal and, finally, for its enlargement by the construction of the Barge Canal.

The world has moved a long way since the first canal was opened, but the wonderful advancement seen in the engineering and construction field, the discoveries made in scientific research and our modern inventions, can in no way dim the glories of the "Grand Canal," as it was formerly called, nor can the canal's beneficial influence on the State and Nation be overrated.

The entire State owes a debt of gratitude to the old Erie Canal whose opening a century ago we plan to celebrate next year. It will be an occasion in which all patriotic citizens familiar with the traditions and record of their State and proud of the achievements of their ancestors should take part.

As the opening of the original canal may be deemed to have been the real birthday of the Empire State, the commemoration of its centennial should be commensurate with the importance of the event.

#### FORM OF PROPOSED CELEBRATION:

The exact form and character of the proposed celebration and the time at which it will be held have not yet been determined, but it has been suggested that the plan of ceremonies of a hundred years ago be followed to the extent found practicable, with necessary additions in historic features and modern developments to bring the canal history down to date.

The original opening was marked with enthusiastic demonstrations from Buffalo to New York. A fleet of splendidly decorated vessels carrying the notables of that day, moved through the waterway from Lake Erie to the Atlantic Ocean, and at every city and village along the route local celebrations in the form of receptions and pageants were had.

It is not proposed, however, to limit the coming celebration to the events of the past. While commemorating in a fitting manner the opening of the old waterway, the Commission will plan to bring forcefully to the minds of the business world the benefits to accrue from a wider and larger use of the present Barge Canal as a means of transportation and to prove that the existing waterway is capable of rendering in these modern times the same relative service as did the original channel.

#### LOCAL CO-OPERATION ASKED:

Under the Statute, the Commission is charged with the duty of arranging preliminary details, devising ways and means and adopting plans for a proper celebration, and in this work we ask the aid and co-operation of all municipalities, of civic, commercial, historical and other organizations, and of all citizens of the State generally. Suggestions looking to the success of the celebration and for the working out of proper plans are earnestly invited.

While the Legislature will be asked to make proper appropriation for the carrying out of such state-wide plans as may be adopted it is expected that the expense of strictly local participation will be borne by the various communities themselves.

The Commission suggests that early consideration be given to the manner in which local funds shall be raised and the question determined as to whether the amount decided upon to be expended locally shall be provided by the municipal budget or by private subscription or by both such methods.

It is suggested that in each community local committees be constituted to consider plans covering the part it shall take in the coming celebration and to co-operate with this Commission in working out a general State program.

Yours very truly,

ERIE CANAL CENTENNIAL COMMISSION,

George Clinton, *Chairman*,

Alfred M. O'Neill, *Secretary*.



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SECRETARY, ALFRED M. O'NEILL, 25 NORTH PEARL STREET, ALBANY, N. Y.

January 9, 1925.

Dear Sir:

In the circular recently sent you, your attention was called to the proposed celebration of the 100th anniversary of the opening of the original Erie Canal; its achievements and influence on the State and Nation; and the desirability of commemorating the centennial in a manner commensurate with its historic importance.

In October last when the matter was presented to the New York State Historical Association at its annual meeting in Buffalo, the following was unanimously adopted:

"The New York State Historical Association hereby records its hearty approval of the proposed plan for a State-wide observance of the Centennial Anniversary of the Erie Canal, now the Barge Canal, and will give its share of service to make the celebration the success it richly deserves. \* \* \* \* "

We feel confident that an organization such as yours - also composed of men and women proud of the record of their State and of the deeds of the early pioneers - will desire to co-operate with the State authorities to such extent as may seem feasible. To that end, the Commission would be pleased to receive from you some message, in the form of a resolution or otherwise, expressing your approval of and interest in the proposed canal centennial.

The Commission will shortly submit its report to the Legislature, recommending a program in the nature of an educational and ceremonial <sup>commemoration</sup> ~~commemoration~~, and therefore would appreciate an early reply.

Yours very truly,

ERIE CANAL CENTENNIAL COMMISSION,

By George Clinton, Chairman,

~~Secretary.~~

TO:

New York Numismatic Society,  
New York City.

*Alfred M. O'Neill*  
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